

The Icarus Bluff Affair

by GM

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**THE _ICARUS BLUFF_ AFFAIR

> **By

> G M<p>

Rated PG for violence and intensity

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"HURRY UP! They'll be here any time!"

"Are these documents really _THAT_ important?"

"Yes."

"Two more minutes is all I need."

"Well, I'll hold 'em off at the pass. You just hurry up with that safe."

"I hate it when you go cowboy on me. And what will you do, blind them with your inimitable charm? They took every conceivable weapon we had -- even our shoelaces! And those weren't even weapons!"

Napoleon Solo paused from his perusal of the room to glance back at his indignant partner. Amusement colored his tone as he responded to the miffed agent. "Well, that will give you something new to work on when we get back to headquarters."

The wiry Russian UNCLE agent knelt near the lower panel of a window nook where he had discovered the cleverly concealed safe. Illya Kuryakin had been in a sour mood since their ill-fated capture. He and his partner had infiltrated a quasi-military retreat to steal documents listing future targets of the independent terrorist group. The mercenaries were lead by a fanatic named Black; a self-appointed wacko with delusions of power through violence.

As a matter of course Illya and Solo had been relieved of their various secret devices and Kuryakin was bitterly resentful. It was not so much the loss of the valuable and sagacious weaponry, but the fact that ALL the subtlety concealed items had been discovered. Something of a first for the sly Russian and he took it personally. After all, he considered it a matter of professional pride.

Solo searched the spacious and luxurious command center and war-room. He pondered the bad luck that had plagued them on this assignment; the immediate capture, the total confiscation of all weapons, the knowledge of who they were and much of what they already knew. Disturbingly, he knew on an instinctive level that it was more than bad luck. Somewhere along the way there must be a leak. As soon as possible they had to steal the documents from the safe and escape. Once safely back at HQ with the papers there would be, hopefully, some evidence to lead them to the security breach.

Even sub-consciously Napoleon hesitated to say 'traitor'. The word left a nasty aftertaste. Yet, the more he thought over the situation, the more it seemed they were dealing with a double-agent somewhere in the ranks of UNCLE. That unpleasant realization had been added motivation for them to implement this desperate, if not completely clever plan of escape. Since the UNCLE men had been relieved of their weapons, the guards had been unprepared for an ingenious attack, and with unexpected ease Solo and Kuryakin had escaped their cell.

"Damn," Kuryakin muttered and punched a fist against the uncooperative safe. He leaned against the metal and for a moment watched his partner prowl the room. "Black knows too much about us," was his laconic comment. "Inside information."

"Yes," was Solo's simple agreement to the uncannily clairvoyant thoughts which echoed his own. Thinking along the same patterns had become second nature to the partners.

"We must take this information back, Napoleon." Kuryakin once more squared off against the stubborn lock. "Perhaps more importantly we must find the leak."

"Of course."

Making it out of the well-fortified camp, however, was another matter entirely. Seventy trained mercenaries pitted against two UNCLE agents -- armed only with their wit and skill -- seemed a trifle unequal. Solo couldn't dwell on depressing statistics. Illya and he had faced

harsh opposition before and had lived to tell the tale. He sometimes wondered if his incredible luck was proportional to the importance of the circumstances. If so, this time they should be able to successfully escape the compound and be back in New York for breakfast.

Although Napoleon Solo offered a devil-may-care facade to the world, he was deeply committed to, and believed in, the idealism and altruism of UNCLE. As Chief Enforcement Agent and leader of Section Two, he felt a keen responsibility to his fellow field agents as well as the organization he worked within. A traitor in the ranks was a deadly threat to the people he was responsible for, as well as a personal affront to his professional abilities. He was determined to live through this assignment and return to headquarters and find the double agent.

Solo scanned the room in frustration. There were few items readily available which could quickly and easily be converted to viable weapons. Perhaps he wouldn't even need a defense if Illya could open the safe and they could get away before the escape was discovered . . . but, best to be prepared.

He grinned as he spotted the fireplace accoutrements and leaped over to the hearth. Seizing the iron poker from its hook he took several experimental jabs and parries, testing the weight and balance of the improvised sword.

With incredulous skepticism, Kuryakin shook his blond haystack of hair. "A poker? You're not Superman you know. Not even you can hold off an army with a fireplace poker!"

Solo screwed his face into a scowl of displeasure, disappointed at his partner's lack of faith. "You open the safe -- I'll perform the heroics. All right?" he retorted defensively.

Kuryakin muttered something unintelligible, but Solo caught a few derogatory comments on arrogance.

"Don't get cheeky, Kuryakin," Solo shot back warily. "You're just jealous because I'm indestructible."

With jarring abruptness the door crashed open. Colonel Thaddeus Black, self-styled mercenary leader and documented extremist, loomed in the doorway, a .45 Magnum in hand. The Colonel's momentum brought him to a sudden halt only a few feet from the Chief Enforcement agent.

With Black's entrance Solo had instinctively raised his poker and the two adversaries faced off in an absurd scene of weaponry opposites: primitive caveman against Twentieth Century gunslinger. The improvised spear was balanced over Solo's shoulder and he was ready to strike -- a formidable opponent, irresolutely facing death with a foolish courage and firm resolve that had darkened his brown eyes with deadly intent. Solo was trained to kill even with this rudimentary weapon -- could adequately defend himself with bare hands, or any other improvised object invented by his incisive mind.

The UNCLE agent's palpable threat made the Colonel pause, but not for long. "Drop it, Solo. The game's up."

"Oh really, Colonel? Just when Illya and I are about to pass _'Go'_ and collect two hundred dollars."

The glib retort did not phase the military leader who steadied the pistol point-blank at Solo's chest. Nothing seemed to penetrate past the obsessed black eyes, behind which lurked the twisted goals of a madman. A fanatic prepared to use any methods to protect his plans.

"All I have to do is raise my voice," he tapped a walkie talkie strapped to his belt, "and my men will have this area surrounded. There's no escape."

Kuryakin had just completed his objective of rifling the safe when Black had broken in. Now the blond agent rose to his feet with slow caution. He was blocked from Black's full vision because Solo was between them.

Kuryakin hardly dared breath -- the fear of any sudden movement provoking Black into action kept him nearly frozen. At that close range Solo had no chance to escape death. Sweat beaded on Kuryakin's face and he was aware of the almost tangible tension in the room. All three of them stood like tableau-figures in some kind of grim, Shakespearean-type tragedy, waiting for the final act.

"Give up, Solo. I can cut you in half before you can flex a muscle." A foreboding smile crept across his face. "Are you tired of your little vacation already? I promise the rest of your stay here will be -- entertaining."

The lines on Solo's face were set in hard, glacial planes. His voice was silky, edged with barely restrained hatred. "We've had quite enough of your hospitality."

Black's face clouded with sudden contempt and anger. "I can see it was a mistake to let you live this long! Drop it or I'll kill you where you stand!"

There was too much at stake for Solo to even consider retreat, though he felt the situation had put his back against the wall so-to-speak. He had reached a point of no return when he and Illya had escaped the cell. There could be no consideration for surrender now -- they had passed their Rubicon. Black would torture them -- slowly.

Napoleon's nature would not accept defeat -- and to surrender meant not only losing to this over-bearing egotist, it also meant a very unpleasant death. Beyond those natural survival instincts was the ever-present commitment to duty. It was vital to get their information back to headquarters.

On a more personal level, he knew neither he nor Illya would live much longer under the auspices of Colonel Black's 'treatments'. He could not condemn his partner and himself to the vengeance Black would inflict upon them now. To fight, however absurd, even fatal, seemed the only way out. After all, as long as they were both alive there was still hope. Now the rules of the game had altered, and it seemed a do-or-die situation. The only comfort was that if he couldn't make it, at least Illya would have a chance to escape. He

intended to give Illya every possible advantage.

"I threw the javelin in college," was Solo's biting retort. His tone made it clear he would offer no quarter and gave credence to the bluff he almost believed himself. "How much are you willing to stake on my accuracy, Colonel? Your life?"

Kuryakin stifled the groan that growled in his throat. _'Not that old ploy again, Napoleon! Must you insist on these insane bluffs, my foolhardy friend?'_

He took a careful, tentative step closer to his partner. There was nothing he could effectively do to help at this distance. It was more of a protective instinct to offer silent support. They had worked together long enough for Solo to be able to feel his presence and know he had whatever backup Illya could provide, which in this case was very little.

With surreptitious ease, Solo slipped his left hand behind his back and covertly gestured for his partner to leave. It was a signal for Kuryakin to slip out the nearby window at the back of the room and escape with the evidence. The stubborn Russian clearly interpreted the signal and ignored it. He was not about to flee leaving his suicidal partner behind. Besides, Solo would never be able to cover the escape. Black would kill the foolhardy hero-half of the team before Kuryakin could get away.

Part of Kuryakin's mind still grasped for an escape. He didn't know how they would get out of this one, if they could. It seemed impossible to get beyond Black, then elude the rest of the army. What WAS important was that they both get out alive. For once he was willing to damn the vitalness of the mission -- the discovery of the terrorist plots, the importance of the traitor in their ranks. He refused to fail his partner in a moment of destiny when Solo's fate was balanced so tenuously in the danger-zone between life and death. It was not the first time the Russian had chosen to protect his partner rather than complete a mission. What worried him was each time he was forced to chose between Napoleon and UNCLE, it became easier and easier to decide in favor of his partner's life.

It was an old scenario the two partners seemed destined to repeat. It was also a constant source of vexation to the pragmatic Russian. Napoleon's proclivity for reckless, madcap bluffs grated against Illya's sense of balance. Like Icarus, Solo had far more bravado than common sense, it seemed, and frequently flew devil-may-care into the sun.

Kuryakin, then, was cast as the reluctant Daedelus, who could not seem to reason with the adventurous Solo. One day the over-confident swashbuckler would soar too close to the heat. Then, not all the brazen courage and intrepid luck in the world would save the top-notch agent from singed wings -- or worse -- a disastrous fall from the heights. Illya dreaded the coming of that fateful day and it threateningly hung over his head like the sword of Damocles.

Even the aloof Russian was not immune to the adventure-tingled nerves, the racing adrenaline heightened in the knife-edge dance with danger. That was the prickling heat Icarus knew -- the heady thrill of flying too close to the sun -- and surviving! There was a kind of fate-defying fascination for daring the intensity of the heat --

seeing how close one could get to the raging sun before aquiring a sunburn.

Kuryakin enjoyed that thrill of daring danger, and wondered why he became so irritated when the American took foolish chances. Risk was part of their job description. So why did Illya object to Solo's heroics? The answer was obvious, although Kuryakin did not want to admit his protective instinct. Danger to himself was easier to accept than danger to Napoleon.

Solo's convictions as well were equally protective. Illya abstractly wondered if this conscious attitude had effected his efficiency as an agent, or their abilities as a team. Tragically, that question could be academic. He wasn't at all sure either of them would get out of this predicament alive.

Every muscle, every nerve strained with tense anticipation. Solo's brain was concentrated on a single focus; his patience pushed to the limit. None of these emotions surging within were revealed on his hardened countenance. He barely breathed. Every trained function of mind and body were now honed to rapier-edged tautness. Each sense was heightened to extreme clarity. An errant thought made him question if it was because of this perilous nearness to death -- or merely the racing flow of adrenaline that provided this sharpness.

The agent's chestnut eyes never dropped Black's intense glare. He was sure the imperceptible harbinger of deadly intent would first be triggered in those sable eyes well before the brain's communiquÃ© was sent to the hand muscles.

Years of staring down the barrel of death had taught Solo nuances of an assassin's mind. He could read the Colonel very well -- feel the deadly resolve emanating from the military man. The days of captivity had taught him more about Black than the Colonel had learned about the UNCLE men.

In the flicker of a second Solo caught the distant glimmer in the obsidian eyes, the imperceptible twitch at the corner of the mouth. The fanatical martinet would pay any price to protect the mercenary kingdom -- even to his own martyrdom. A dyed-in-the-wool, one hundred percent unbalanced maniac -- more dangerous than any half-dozen hit men.

Napoleon Solo knew this was his moment of destiny. An anxious tingle of fear snaked along his spine and penetrated his very marrow in that microsecond of time. He knew Black would pull the trigger now, with the same fatal assurance that he knew neither of them would survive. Being a martyr had never been one of Solo's goals, however, his own stubbornness resolved that he would not go down without a fight. After all, Illya was depending on him.

From Kuryakin's line of sight he could spot Black's gun hand twitch. He knew Napoleon's time had run out.

The sequence of events happened with such a cataclysmic blur they piled atop each other in fractional microcosms of tragedy. The rush of inevitable action in the fatal movements seemed to transpire in ironically derisive slow motion.

The wiry blond agent sprang into a leap in the same instant the makeshift harpoon flew from Solo's hand -- the same instant the pistol exploded in a sanguinary rain of lead. Kuryakin crashed on top of his partner and both slid along the floor to impact with a nearby chair. Seconds passed before Illya was aware of the sting from a bullet crease on his right forearm. The wound was not serious, but it felt like the bullet had clipped a muscle and it was exceedingly painful.

For frozen moments it seemed the world had stopped. There was a dense, sepulcuric dampening of time in the oppressive stillness of the room. The acrid bite of gunpowder mingled with the heavier odors of blood and death. Staccato expulsions of breath riveted the near-silence, yet were barely audible over the wild hammer of the Russian's heartbeat that thundered in his ears. He took several long, deep, calming breaths to steady the jumpy nerves and the adrenaline that raced through his system at light speed. When his shaky limbs were in sufficient control, he propped up on his left elbow.

Black had dropped in the doorway. The poker protruded from the scarlet-covered chest like a black and bloodied guidepost. Death had probably come before the Colonel hit the floor. The .45 was still gripped in the dead man's hand.

Kuryakin incredulously shook his head and patted his partner on the arm. "I don't believe it," he sighed with released tension and lifted his weight off Solo. "You did it!" It almost made the skeptical Russian believe in miracles. Or at least in the intrepid luck of a certain adventurous American. "But please don't ever use that stupid bluff again. Even if you do think you're Superman."

Solo's face was turned away, his voice a muffled, hoarse whisper. "Too bad I can't . . . stop speeding bullets."

Kuryakin winced in concern at the pronouncement. "Naploeon?"

With growing panic he realized Solo had not moved. Illya felt a warm, sticky liquid spreading on his hand trapped under his recumbent partner. His own wound was forgotten in the shadow of his friend's injuries. "How bad?" His voice was tight and dry. He tried to push Solo over, but Solo resisted and shrugged away from the touch. "Napoleon?"

Solo's face was twisted with pain as he turned toward Kuryakin. "Bad enough," he finally gasped.

"Let me help you."

The dark head, now glistening with sweat, shook in a negative gesture. Both of Solo's hands were tightly clutched to his stomach, his body shaking from the ripples of agony that coursed through him with each painfully drawn breath.

Kuryakin was afraid to push further, afraid to confirm his worst fears. It looked like a stomach wound. Inflicted from close range, a .45 bullet to the stomach would be fatal. Certainly this far from medical attention nothing could save his friend. The realization numbed his mind and cushioned the real impact of the shock. He was operating on an automatic level, not really aware of time, or danger

or anything beyond the sphere of the critically wounded Solo.

"What can I do?" he whispered in a shaky voice.

Solo shook his head. "Nothing . . . for me" His lips curled ruefully. "Guess I'm not . . . as indestructible . . . as I thought." The realization seemed to come as a rude surprise to the agent -- taken aback that his bluff had not worked. "You . . . better get . . . out," he admonished in a strained voice.

Incisive blue eyes narrowed with stubborn resolve and Kuryakin shook his head. "I can't leave you," he quietly countered and swallowed the catch in his throat. Determined to help, he gently pushed Solo over. Solo ground his teeth against the pain and bit back a cry.

An involuntary gasp escaped Kuryakin as he stared at the havoc wrecked on the fragile human body by a high calibre bullet. Blood had spread in a deep scarlet blanket across Napoleon's white shirt. The protective hands could not quite hide the jagged tear in the cloth, nor the ripped flesh torn asunder by the .45 magnum slug fired at close range. "Napoleon . . . "

Solo shook his head and gulped in an uneven breath. "Nevermind . . . get out." His voice cracked with pain. The brown eyes were already glazed from the shock. "Leave . . . get away . . ." was the whispered warning before he clamped his eyes shut against the waves of agony. Tears welled on the dark eyelashes.

Kuryakin's tousled hair shook in defiance. "No!" His own eyes stung with despair, in an obstinate display of rebellion to an unjust world. He cursed the fate that had decreed his friend would suffer such a slow, painful, and lonely death. Illya was powerless to prevent the inevitability of death, or even ease the pain.

The misty brown eyes opened, glinting with quiet amusement, or perhaps shock. "Don't you ever . . . obey orders?" Solo rasped, his words wheezed out with hard-won breaths.

"Not yours." Illya wrapped an arm around Solo and eased him into a more comfortable position against the chair. The movement tore an agonized cry from the agent and caused so much pain Solo nearly passed out. He clutched onto Illya for several moments until the worst of the anguish subsided. One stained hand remained on the Russian's arm in a gesture of affection.

"Please go . . . " He was assailed by another spasm of pain and bit his lip so hard it bled. He pushed his partner away. "Go."

Illya caught Solo's hand and held it tight. "Not without you," he countered harshly. "We both go together or not at all!" His mind fleetingly wondered about the impulsive, foolhardy pronouncement, but desperation quickly overshadowed any other consideration.

There was a light shake of Solo's head. "UNCLE comes first . . . before partnership." Even in his weakened condition, he retained the authority of the Chief Enforcement Officer of Section Two.

Even as Kuryakin cursed his friend's hypocritical heroism, he knew Solo was right. When considered in the cold analysis of professionalism, what other choice was there? In a practical sense

Solo was already dead, which left no real choices at all.

Every fiber of Illya's heart and mind was filled with repugnance for the 'mission'; for the mindless fanaticism which was the root of this crisis, for the tragedies perpetrated in the name of 'duty', and for his own commitment to that cause. He hated himself for what he was about to do in the nebulous name of 'right'. An act which would force him to be a traitor to himself and his best friend -- to the life he prized more highly than his own.

A glimmer of possibility flashed in his mind: perhaps he could carry Solo with him . . . The hope died stillborn. Physically he was not capable -- his arm almost useless from the slight but significant wound -- and his gravely wounded friend probably would not survive the pain and trauma of excessive movement.

Perhaps there was another hope. If he could escape the compound and bring in reinforcements . . . It was a meager defense against the crushing despair that crowded around his senses. He momentarily seized onto the stupid idea as if it were a lifeline, before pragmatism set in and refocused him into reality. A cold and bitter reality which he hated, yet he could not ignore.

He gripped tighter to Solo's hand -- his most vivid reality left in an unbalanced world. The flesh was cool, the blood warmly viscid, but there was a measure of returned pressure in the grasp. A silent message which did not require a verbal response. Then Solo forcibly removed his hand from Kuryakin -- an overt signal that he expected Illya to leave.

Kuryakin finally forced himself to slowly come to his feet with a kind of fatal resignation. He stared down at his friend and balked on the brink of revolt. Then reason -- hard, damnable logic reminded him there was no other choice. In ruthless denial, he focused on the lofty ideals of his oath. Illya Kuryakin was an UNCLE agent first he harshly reminded his overly sensitive emotions. It was his responsibility to return to UNCLE and ferret out the traitor, to destroy these dangerous mercenaries. The mission was no less important because only one of them would be returning.

Decision resolutely made, Illya stepped over and pried the automatic pistol from Black's hand. He took the time to tear off a piece of shirt to wrap his bleeding arm. He hesitated, not daring to retreat as he glanced back at Solo, who was lying on his back, eyes closed and very -- too -- still. If he crossed back to his partner now he would never leave.

"I'll -- I'll be back with the Cavalry."

It was a lie he wanted to believe, just as he wanted to believe Solo could last long enough for a rescue. His tone baldly reflected the lie, the fear. He was giving no credit at all to his partner's incredible luck, or the resolute stubbornness and survival capacity of the American. Yet what could even Napoleon do this time? Gravely wounded and in the hands of their enemies, there was no hope. Illya leaned on the wall, his head on his arm, momentarily overcome by the anguish. He desperately wanted to believe Solo could be rescued. There didn't seem to be anything else to live for.

"Sure," was the reply that was bravely lying, yet sounded as if Solo

wanted to believe it too.

"Damn you," Illya whispered with ragged condemnation. Before he could think, his torn regrets tumbled out. "You had to fly so close and now you are burned."

Solo turned toward him and opened an eye. "I should be the delirious one." He took a breath. "Maybe I am."

Kuryakin shook his head and stared up at the ceiling so the wetness in his eyes would not roll down his face. "Damn your stupid heroics, Napoleon." He straightened and faced the window. HE would not -- could not -- look back.

"Good luck, Illya." The Russian didn't move. "Go."

It was a release. Resolutely, Kuryakin stepped to the window. He easily slipped the catch, raised the glass and swung out the window. An inert weight crushed against his chest -- an oppressive fear that he would never again see his partner alive again. The agony was tempered with the echo of Solo's unquestioning faith. Solo had accepted whatever fate decreed for their futures -- who would live and who would die. Illya had to accept it as well. Without wasting another moment Kuryakin slipped through the window and left.

The pain or the shock was effecting Solo's vision, but he had a clear picture of Kuryakin's exit from the room. He closed his eyes and let the pain wash over him, but even the ache was not powerful enough to ward off the cold and fatigue. Those twin miseries folded around him like a blanket and he determined that this cocoon of false security would be a sleep he would not awaken from. He was mildly surprised that there wasn't more fear or anger or something else raging in his mind. There was only an absurd amusement. At Illya. At Illya's parting comments -- damning him for his risks.

'I DID throw the poker dead on target,' he wittily reminded even though his partner was not there to hear the pun, even though he no longer had the strength to utter the thought aloud.

No, there was something else there lurking next to the amusement. It was regret -- the bitter, sour realization that he was leaving this life without finishing things in this plane of existence. Not the mission, not that date he would miss with that new agent in Section Three -- this was a real regret. Although it seemed he and his friend had been through everything together, Napoleon felt a sense of loss that there would not be more experiences, more of the rich relationship which had been the single most meaningful thing in his life.

'Damn you, Napoleon,' he silently condemned himself. He had done the only thing he could, but he hadn't wanted it to end like this.

"Now you are stealing my lines," came a stern reprimand.

Solo forced himself from the foggy grey mist inside his mind. He was

in terrible pain, but he managed to work through it, willing his eyes to open. He managed a single eyelid to raise. Illya Kuryakin was only inches away.

"Against my better judgement I have returned to rescue you."

He carefully, slowly, lifted Solo onto a gurney. It was an effort considering Illya had an injured arm, but had managed to move the wounded agent without too many added traumas.

"Did you know the infirmary, with a fully stocked ambulance, was right next to this room?" Kuryakin rhetorically asked as he maneuvered around Black's body and toward the door. "Did you also know that everyone -- EVERYONE," he emphasized, "is out of the compound on training exercises?"

Solo mutely shook his head at the revelations.

"The ambulance also has a radio monitoring the training. The army is on the other side of the hill. I thought, with the extra time I had, I would come back and remove your worthless body from the compound. I hate to leave things lying around."

Solo nodded. Of course. That was the way their partnership worked. There was no risk they wouldn't take for the other, no act -- no matter how foolish -- they would fail to try to save the other. Was that what Illya meant by flying too close to the sun? Wasn't that part of his job description?

They would, of course, never admit it, either of them. Because no comment or explanation was needed. That was the way they worked. He was very glad he would have more opportunities to take those risks along with, for the sake of, his friend. And he **WOULD** live. It was the least he could do after Illya went to all this trouble to save his life.

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THE END

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